

Colonial Rule and the Exploitation of Forest Resources in Benin (Benin Province) of Nigeria

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Abstract: *This paper examines the processes by which the British commercialized and exploited the forest resources in Benin for the sole benefit of the metropolis. On the successful conquest and colonization of Benin in 1897, the British authorities in collaboration of British firms invaded Benin forests for extraction of their abundant resources, especially timbers. In the course of this endeavour, the people of Benin, the owners of the forests, were relegated to the background. This paper therefore brings to fore the policies which were formulated and implemented by the British colonial authorities in the exploitation of Benin forests and the benefits or otherwise that accrued to all the stakeholders: the colonial authorities, foreign firms and the indigenous people. Rubber (funtumia and landophia) does not fall within the purview of this paper because as early as 1903 it had been domesticated and widely cultivated in plantations; thus making it an agricultural product as distinct from forest resources. The paper is derived from a synthesis of relevant materials obtained from archival materials especially those relating to forestry in colonial Benin obtained from the National Archive of Nigeria, Ibadan; oral information from respondents who are knowledgeable in forestry matters in colonial Benin; and textbooks and other published materials. It is expected that this article would stimulate more research on timber exploitation not only in Benin but other parts of southern Nigeria in the period under consideration.*

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Keywords: Benin Forest Resources, Timbers, Colonial Rule, Colonial Exploitation

Introduction

Benin lies in the thick rain forest region of southern-western Nigeria. In 1897 the kingdom was militarily conquered and occupied by the British expeditionary forces and subsequently integrated into the larger British Empire. As administrative convenience became indispensable solution to the problem which the conquest of Benin and later other parts of Nigeria engendered to the British, they introduced the provincial system of administration. Therefore, Benin emerged as one of the provinces in Southern Nigeria which comprised Benin Division, Ishan (Esan) Division, Asaba Division and later Kukuruku Division. The Benin Division¹ being the largest and strategically located and the most viable in terms of forest resources is the subject of this paper.

Benin forests were richly endowed with different species of trees which included *ogwangho* (mahogany), *ekpakpogho* (*entandro phragma*), *iroko* (*chlorophora excelsa*), walnuts (*gaurea thompsonii*), *ekhimwin* (*piptadenia africana*), *okhan* (*cyclicodscus gabunensis*) *ovbiache* (*sarcocephalus esculentus*), *okhuen* (*ricihodedruon africana*), *obobo* (*sarcocephalus esculentus*), *iyin* (*erythrophloeum guineensis*)² among others. The exploitation of forests in pre-colonial period was not restricted to a section or class of people but everyone in the community. The trees were exploited for the production of items of utilities as well as fuel for making fire. Different wild animals such as deer, antelopes, elephants, monkeys, baboons, porcupines, grass-cutters, rodents, rabbits or giant pouched rats, hares, bush pigs, guinea fowls and birds among which served as animal protein were obtained from the forests through individual and organized hunting by the men

¹ For a concise description of the geographical territory refers to as Benin in this paper, see National Archives, Ibadan (hereinafter refers to as NAI), BP.40, Vol. VI, "Annual Report, Benin Province, 1937", p. 3; NAI, CSO 26/2 14617, Vol. XIII, "Annual Report, Benin Province, 1938", pp. 1-26. Also see Joseph I. Osagie & Frank Ikponmwosa, "The Response of Benin Rubber Industry to Colonial and World demands, 1900-1945", *OFO: Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, Vol. 2, December, 2011, pp. 79-81 and "Craft Guilds and the Sustenance of Pre-Colonial Benin Monarchy", *International Journal of Arts and Humanities*, Vol. 4 No. 1, January, 2015, pp.1-17.

² NAI, BenProf. 3/4, BP.4/3/4, H.N. Nevins, "Intelligence Report (Economic) on Benin Division 1924", pp 121-122. This document can still be obtained at the Ministry of Local Government and Chieftaincy Affairs (MLGA), Benin City, Nigeria.

without hindrance. The forest also provided invertebrates such as mushrooms, insects and snails which were gathered by the women to enrich their food. The forests, just as land were communally owned and everyone in the community had unfettered access to exploit their resources. The forests therefore, had no pecuniary value beyond utilizing their resources for the benefit of the individuals and the community. It was however, not until the emergence of the British and the massive exploitation of timbers by foreign firms that the people realized that “big money”³ existed in their forests. It was the attempt by the people to also benefit from the wealth derivable from the exploitation of the timbers in their God-given forests that led to the clash of interest between them and colonial authorities.

Valuation Survey and Enumeration of Timbers

Following the successful establishment of colonial rule in Benin, the vast forest resources came under the firm control of the British. Concerted efforts were henceforth made toward their commercialization for maximum exploitations for exports. Thereafter, the exploitation of valuable trees in the forest no longer served the interest of the colonized people (forest owners) of Benin but that of the colonizers. The first step taken by the British colonial officials in this direction was to embark on forest “valuation survey” and “enumeration of trees”⁴ to determine the extent of the vast nature of Benin forest and the types of trees therein. The trees were classified into two categories: first class and second class. The first class trees were *iroko*, *ekhimwin*, *obobo*, *ogwango*, *eba*, *okha* and *ada* while the others were second class.⁵ At the completion of valuation and enumerations, some areas which were densely concentrated with valuable trees were earmarked as “reserves” upon which encroachment for whatever reasons was not allowed. For example, the colonial regulation governing the maintenance of reserves stated that:

When a reserve has been established, it is essential to maintain it as such and it is every administrative officer’s duty to assist as far as possible in its maintenance and to oppose its destruction. It is especially important in places where population (of trees) is dense. It is no cure to land hunger to

³ NAI BenProf. CSO 26/2/14617 Vol. XV. “Annual Report, 1949: Benin Province”, p. 5.

⁴ NAI BenProf 3/4 BP. 4/3/4, H.N Nevins, “Intelligence Report (Economic) on Benin Division 1924”, pp. 121-122.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

destroy that last bit of fertile soil left in a district His Honour wishes it brought home to the Native Authorities that he views with the strongest disapproval ... encroachment on forest reserves.⁶

Consequently, there emerged about sixteen (16) forest reserves in Benin Division with effective total area of about two thousand eight hundred and forty-one (2,841.18) square miles⁷ which represented about 30 per cent of the total Benin territory.⁸ This made Benin the highest concentration of forest reserves in Southern Nigeria.⁹

Table 1: Forest Reserves and Dimensions in Benin Division

Name of Reserves	Total Square Miles	Effective Reserve Square Miles
Ebue	253	73.
Ekenwan	158.5	158.5
Ekiadolor	275	272.75
Ehor	406.5	405.5
Gilli-Gilli	140	136.28
Iguobazuwa	225	218.
Obaretin	42.14	42.09
Obaretin Extension	9.8	9.8
Ogba	24.37	24.37
Ohosu	330	168.
Ologbo	77.69	77.69
Ologbo Extension	12.8	12.8
Okomu	520	500
Owan River	122.07	119.57
Sokponba	196.13	185.83
Urhonigbe	437	437.
Total	3,230.	2,841.18

⁶ NAI, BD 146 "Forest Reserves in the Southern Provinces: Secretary's Office, Southern Provinces Enugu to the Resident", Benin Province, 20 April, 1937, p. 11.

⁷ NAI BP.1642 Vol. I, "Forest Reserves and Total Square Miles", Benin Division, pp. 13-14.

⁸ P.A. Igbafe, *The Nemesis of Power: Agho Obaseki and Benin Politics 1897-1956*, Lagos, Longman, 1991, pp. 86-87.

⁹ *Ibidem*. Also see NAI "Forest Reserves in the Southern Provinces: Procedure Information", pp. 7-25 and Frank Ikponmwosa, "Colonial Rule and Economic Development in Benin" Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of History and International Studies, University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria, 2014, pp. 250-251.

Source: NAI, BP1642, “Forest reserves and total square miles”, pp. 13-

14.

Forests outside the reserves were categorized as free areas or unreserved. Yet, this did not sanction or support its exploitation by the indigenous people for whatever reason. In other words, the exploitation of valuable trees for exports by colonial authorities was not limited to forest reserves but included free areas or unreserved. While trees in reserves were demarcated into compartments to ease exploitation, those outside the reserves (unreserved) were termed “protected trees” which could not be exploited without permits from the colonial authorities even when such trees lay within an individual’s cultivatable farm land.¹⁰ It was in this regard that many farmers were subsequently prosecuted in Benin for felling trees in their farms without permits. Such trees were felled by farmers not for sale, but burnt while preparing their farm land for cultivation.¹¹ For example, in October 1916, one Mr. Okoro of Igwikpe village was charged for felling one camwood tree in his farm without a permit. He was found guilty by the District Officer, Benin Division, Mr. W.H. Cooke and consequently fined 10/- as well as paying the permit fee to the Forestry Department.¹² Also, Messrs Osakwe and Oviawe both of Ugbine village along Benin- Ekenwan Road were ordered by Mr. Cooke to plant twenty (20) each of *iroko*, *obobo* and *umaga* trees as replacement for felling one *iroko*, one *obobo* and one *umaga* in their farms without permits.¹³ Several other cases were tried and many farmers convicted and fined.¹⁴ Once a forest guard visited any farm, he would easily discover protected trees felled or burnt by the farmers in the process of clearing the bushes for farms. The evidence of the forest guards easily secured a conviction. It was thus unfortunate that the British authorities’ regulations prevented the owners of the forest unfettered access to their God given resources. Any tree felled by the people without permit was regarded as “stolen timber” and in 1951, the colonial authorities had to set up a “special log

¹⁰ NAI BenProf. “Annual Reports, Benin Province 1937”, p. 22. This information was also corroborated from interview with Pa. V. N. E. Osakue 94 years Retired Farmer and Pa T. O. Osemwegie, 84 years, Retired Civil Servant, Benin City, 24th August, 2011.

¹¹ *Ibidem*. See also P.A. Igbafe, *The Nemesis of Power*, pp. 86-87.

¹² NAI, BD. 14 Vol. I, No.2, “Rex vs Okoro of Igwikpe”, p. 4.

¹³ *Ibidem*. See also Igbafe, *The Nemesis of Power*, pp. 86-87.

¹⁴ See for example NAI, BD/14/I, Vol. II, “Timber rules: Judgment, guilty”, pp. 227-228.

control organization” to monitor the movement of logs in Benin Province. According to the 1951 Annual Reports of Benin Province;

One unfortunate effect of the timber book was to stimulate to an alarming degree the trade in illicit logs, both illegally taken (i.e. felled without permits) and stolen after felling. The wholesale stealing of logs became so serious that a Forest Officer carried out a special investigation into the question early in the year. More recently, a special log control organization was set up at Sapele with a Development Officer in Charge.

The prevention of illegal felling, especially of Abure in the swamp area, continues to be a great problem and it cannot be claimed that the attempts made to solve it have been by any means entirely successful.¹⁵

Exploitation of Timber

When the processes of valuation, enumeration and demarcations were completed, the stage was set for the exploitation of trees in Benin forests;

Working plans for all reserves are now urgently required. Two simple plans covering 360 and 78 sq. miles of forest await approval by the Chief Conservator of Forest and His Excellency the Governor. An officer especially detailed for the work arrived in October to prepare a detailed plan for a further 800 sq. miles. In the reserve area, control of felling is now everywhere enforced. Our object is to achieve a normal annual cut of ... productive reserved forest and to run the forest on a 100 year rotation.¹⁶

Consequently, agreements were reached between the Forestry Department and some British firms such as African Timber and Plywood Company (AT & P), I.T. Palmer, the British West Africa Timber Company (BWATC), Nigerian Hardwood, and Norken Lumber Company of London for the exploitation of timbers from Benin forests. The largest operator of these foreign firms was the African Timber and Plywood Company who was at any point in time allocated sixteen acres to every one acre allocated to the others.¹⁷

It should be mentioned that although forestry matters were taken over by the Benin Native Authority (B.N.A.) from 1935, quite often, their rules were

¹⁵ NAI BenProf. 40/Vol. XV: “Annual Report Benin Province, 1951”, p. 6.

¹⁶ NAI BenProf 2, BP. 41, Vol.X, “Annual Reports Benin Division, 1948”, p. 42.

¹⁷ NAI BenProf. 40/Vol.VI “Annual Report on the Benin Province for 1937”, p. 6.

superseded by the colonial authorities' ordinances and regulations.¹⁸ By implication, even though the B.N.A. became responsible for the issuance of license or concession for the exploitation of timber, it was with the strict guidance and directive of the colonial Chief Conservator of Forest who favoured the issuance of license to British firms. This accounted for the fact that not until after the Second World War, no indigenous company or individual was issued a license or concession to cut timber for commercial purposes in the forest, whether reserved or unreserved. Therefore, British firms monopolized the timber industry in Benin. In fact, some of these companies were granted license to exploit the forest for up to twenty-five (25) years. For example,

... on the 30th of August (1945), an agreement was signed between the Benin Native Authority and the United Africa Company. The agreement covers forest exploitation by the company over all their holdings in Benin Division, both reserved and unreserved forests, for the period 1945 - 1970. Similar agreements have been drafted covering the holdings of Messrs Nigerian Hardwood Ltd., and British West African Timber Company Ltd.¹⁹

Although there were individual timber sub-contractors in Benin, they only got their license (permissive rights) from any of the British firms to exploit timber from their respective compartments on their behalf and supply to them. In effect, these indigenous sub-contractors were controlled and regulated by the British firms who granted them license and not the Benin Native Authority.²⁰ However, from the late 1940s, foreign monopoly of the forest exploitation became unsatisfactory to the people of Benin and the B.N.A. to the extent of eliciting condemnation and agitation. Both began to agitate for a more direct and active participation of the indigenes in the exploitation of their forest resources. Accordingly;

¹⁸ W.A. Firbairn, Conservator of Forest, Benin District, "Report on Proposed Forest Reserves within Benin Division", 1934, p. 4. and Appendix I, Also see Igbafe, *Benin Under British Administration: The Impact of Colonial Rule on an African Kingdom*, London, Longman, 1979, p. 357.

¹⁹ NAI BenProf., "Annual Report Benin Division 1948", p. 42.

²⁰ Interviews with Pa V.N.E. Osakue and Pa T.O. Osemwengie. These respondents assert that permission granted to indigenous sub-contractors could be withdrawn at any time on the flimsy reasons of suspecting such contractor(s) was supplying timbers to firm(s) other than the one that granted them such permission to extract timbers from their compartment.

[t]here has been much stormy discussion of forestry matters The Native Authority retains the impression that present forest policy will operate mainly for the benefit of European firms, that the forest owners (indigenes) receive an inadequate return and that too small a forest areas remains open for exploitation by Binis. There is also the perennial complaint that the area of Forest Reserves is excessive, and leaves insufficient land for farming.²¹

To remedy this lopsidedness or inadequacy, the B.N.A. took some far reaching decisions that license be granted only to individuals or indigenous companies capable of the efficient working of saw-mills and operating independently of any European firm. Consequently, Chief Gaius Obaseki was granted 2sq. miles of Area BC.14 of Benin forest reserves. Thus, he became the first indigenous timber contractor with direct concession right.²² This concession enabled him to operate a saw-mill in Siluko from 1952, where he supplied sawn planks which were unattractive to foreign firms, for domestic consumption. Also, two other indigenous firms, Akenzua and sons and Chief Iyi Eweka & Co. were subsequently granted 1sq. mile each of reserve for exploitation.²³ This was however insignificant and hardly satisfactory. First, foreign (British) firms still controlled more than 90 per cent of concessive compartments in Benin Division. Second, over 95 per cent of timbers exploited in Benin were exported to Europe.²⁴ The colonial authority thus, formulated repressive policies for the exploitation of forest resources in Benin Division to the detriment of the indigenous people. The outcome was that the people's rights to farm, collect palm produce, hunt for animals in the forests and cut poles and sticks for fencing, building and roofing were curtailed.²⁵ For instance, although no permit was required for the felling of second class trees for

²¹ NAI, BenProf. 41 Vol. IX, "Annual Reports, Benin Division, 1946", p.12.

²² Ibid. Also see, NAI, BenProf.. 40, Vol. XIV, "Annual Report Benin Province 1950", p. 39.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ NAI BenProf. 1642, "Forest Reserve: Trees Felled", p.13. NAI, CSO 26/2, 14617, Vol. XV, "Annual Report, Benin Province, 1949", p.5 & p.11. Also see J.O. Ahazuem and Toyin Falola, "Production for the Metropolis: Agriculture and Forest Products", in Toyin Falola (ed.), *Britain and Nigeria: Exploitation or Development?*, London, Zed Books, 1987, p. 86.

²⁵ Several deterring permits were required to exploit forest resources other than timber. There were permits to fish (where there were streams); hunt; collect palm fruits among others in the forest. See NAI BP 1642 "Forest Reserve and total square Miles, Summary of Total Receipt of Payment", pp. 141-143. Also see Igbafe, *Benin Under British Administration*, p. 354.

private use or purpose, a heavy fee of 56/- (fifty-six shillings) was paid for permit to fell first class trees.²⁶ This deterring permit fees was imposed to ensure that all the valuable trees in Benin forests that were suitable for export were protected.

The economic importance of the forest resources (timbers) to Britain was quite huge. Before the Second World War, timber exports only accounted for less than one per cent of her total exports from Nigeria. At the end of the War, it rose to three and half per cent of Nigeria's total export to Britain, and was valued at £4.6 million. By 1960, this had significantly risen to about £7 million where the Benin Division accounted for about half of the total number of the exported timbers.²⁷ Table two below shows the nature, volume and value of Nigeria's exports of timber from 1899-1940.

Table 2: Nigeria's export of timber, 1899-1940

	Mahogany	Value	Ebony	Value	Others	Value
<i>Year</i>	Cu.ft	£	(Tons)	£	(tons)	£
1899	7,680	34,737	N.A	-	-	-
1900	13,250	58,374	N.A	-	-	-
1905	173,791	11,919	N.A	-	-	-
1910	15,198	60,191	59.15	116	-	-
1918	7,751	54,172	11	51	-	15
1920	9,016	68,480	-	-	-	186
1925	9,776	139,726	-	119	-	-
1927	2,033,720	307,257	45	381	655	4,998
1929	1,637,494	294,672	6	44	726	4,781
1930	1,872,999	242,952	485	589	7,343	51,728
1931	171,933	110,057	73	476	12838	84,797

²⁶ First class trees were *Iroko*, *Ekhimwin*, *obobo*, *ogwango*, *eba*, *okha* and *ada*. See H.N.Nevis, "Intelligence Report", p. 122. For fees charged, see, NAI, BD.5 Vol. IV, No. 12, "Forestry Matters", 1921. See also, Igbafe, *The Nemesis of Power*, p. 84 and Interview with Pa Iroquo Ikponmwosa, in which he said that even when this permit fees were paid to fell first class trees for local use, the permits were at time not issued by the District Officer on the excuse that the total percentage or quota of timber allotted for local use in that particular year had already been exhausted and such request had to wait for subsequent year(s).

²⁷ J.O. Ahazuem and Toyin Falola, "Production for the Metropolis: Agriculture and Forest Products", p. 86. According to A.H. Unwin, Benin "has earned notoriety for an exploitation of mahogany much exceeding that from any of the other Provinces of Nigeria, where timbers were also exploited for exports. See, A.H. Unwin, "The Forests and Forest Department of Nigeria", *Journal of the Royal African Society*, Vol. 18, No. 68, Oct. 1918, pp. 9-31.

1932	157,753	76,353	-	181	-	51,591
1933	625,076	62,136	33	130	14,608	44,294
1934	736,298	58,444	11	118	19,398	44,578
1935	1,016,119	85,448	470	1,793	32,744	95,891
1936	1,028,349	85,552	444	1,882	2,855*	13,571
1937	215,158	46,775	188	655	954,036*	66,920
1938	634,491	53,225	-	-	884,381*	53,191
1939	135,226	9,439	-	-	817,514*	46,880
1940	387,397	46,397	-	-	106,611*	66,394
			N.A – Not Available.		*cu.ft.	

Source: E.O. Egboh, “British Forestry Policy in Nigeria 1897-1940” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Birmingham, pp.378-388.

Most of Nigeria’s exported timbers had their destinations in Britain where wood of high quality grade including mahoganies, walnuts among others were used for the manufacture of aircraft propellers, furniture, construction work, panelling and ship building.²⁸ The quest for timber by European countries spurred British firms to engage in rapid felling of trees both in reserves and unreserved forests for export. These firms made huge profit from the timber industry at the expense of the people of Benin who in most cases were deprived of their farm land (now reserves and protected area) and forest resources. As early as 1937, European markets were already enjoying great boom from timber from Nigeria. According to 1937 Annual Reports on Benin Province, “[i]n 1937 commercial exploitation was a record year for the export trade and there was an increase of about 50% in the number of trees felled [in Benin] for export. Nigerian timber enjoyed a boom in the European markets.”²⁹

The labour for the actual exploitation (clearing, cutting and loading) of timber was provided by the indigenous people mostly the Igbo migrants who were employed as casual labourers. They were usually engaged on a six months contract with remunerations arbitrarily fixed by the timber exploitation firms. These employees rendered their services under the strict supervisions of a few expatriates who were in most cases foreigners. As at the outbreak of the War, about 3000 casual labourers were employed by European firms on timber exploitation in

²⁸ Ahazuem and Falola, *Ibidem*. pp. 86-87.

²⁹ NAI BenProf. 40.Vol. VI, “Annual Report on the Benin Province for 1937”, p. 12.

Benin.³⁰ However, when the mechanization of the industry which began in the late 1920s intensified during the late 1940s, the work force in the industry was drastically reduced.³¹ The introduction and subsequent intensification of the use of cranes, tractors and motor saw among others, gradually reduced the number of unskilled workers in the industry by more than half as at 1949.³² Those who were retained were remunerated not based on actual work done but at the discretion of the firms, while at times there were complaints of non-payment of wages for work done.³³ In addition, the labourers were poorly accommodated in temporary shelter made of bark of trees in “timber camps” during the period of exploitation of a particular area. Consequently, the industry during the late 1940s attracted “mostly Igbo strangers who seek temporary employment for a few months in order to acquire a few pounds cash” for business.³⁴

Exploited logs in Benin forest were transported to Sapele (a port town in Warri Province) from where they were shipped to Europe. The transportation of logs from Benin forest took two courses; rivers and roads. In the former, logs exploited especially in the riverine areas of Benin including Gilli-Gilli, Ologbo, Siluko, Ossiommo and Ofunama were floated or barged through the river to Sapele. By 1949, the colonial authorities had built two logging ports each with a great crane and a steel-faced wharf in these riverine areas to enhance the evacuation of timbers to Sapele.³⁵ In the latter (roads), the mechanization of the industry no doubt, led to the construction of motorable roads for the transportation of logs. In 1949 Annual Reports, it was said that “tractors and vast trucks with trailers appear all over the places ... even heavy road-graders were seen smoothing highways through the bush” while vast trucks with trailers loaded with complete tree-length appeared all over the place conveying logs from the forest direct to Sapele.³⁶ Consequently,

³⁰ NAI BenProf. CSO 26/2, No. 14617, Vol. XIV, “Annual Report Benin Province, 1940”, p. 17. The timber industry was one of the largest employers of labour in Benin during the colonial period. See. NAI BP, 40, Vol. VI, “Annual Report, Benin Province, 1937”, p. 24. Also see NAI, BP.40, Vol. VIII, “Annual Report, 1939”, p. 31.

³¹ NAI BenProf. 40, Vol. VI, Ibid., p. 22.

³² See NAI BenProf. “Annual Report 1939”, p. 31 and NAI, “Annual Report, 1950”, p. 29.

³³ Interview with Pa Iroquo Ikonmwosa.

³⁴ NAI BenProf. “Annual Report 1919”, p.31 and NAI, BenProf. “Annual Report, 1950”, p. 29.

³⁵ NAI BenProf. CSO 26/2/14617 Vol. XV, “Annual Report, 1949, Benin Province”, p. 5.

³⁶ The mechanization of the timber industry witnessed importation of earth-moving equipment for the construction of roads that could accommodate heavy duty vehicles for the transportation of logs

[t]he Division (Benin) is becoming crisis-crossed with timber roads through the bush and the casual motorists not infrequently meet ten and twenty ton tractors and trailers thundering down narrow roads in the most unexpected place.³⁷

Most of these roads appeared narrow, single-lane that hardly served as inter-village network, passing through the thick forest where they avoided hills and physical obstacles. As a result, they seemed far from straight and unnecessarily long. Therefore, such roads could hardly satisfy transport needs of the indigenous people but logs. At best, it could be argued that the construction of roads in Benin forests was an essential means by which the exploitation of its resources by Britain was achieved. That the people eventually used them for social and economic interactions was an un-intended benefit. Elsewhere in Benin Province especially, Ishan Division, the immediate neighbor to the north of Benin, similar exploitation of forest for timber by Britain occurred. Farmers in Ishan were deprived of their farm land which was earmarked for reserves. Worse still, the unreserved land with protected valuable trees could not be farmed upon because of the destructive effect of heavy commercial timber exploitation on the land.³⁸

Although the colonial authorities alleged that “big money” was made in timber,³⁹ this was not for the benefit of the people of Benin, but that of Britain. There is compelling evidence that explicitly supports this argument. For example, up to the end of the Second World War, almost all timber exploited from Benin forest (as illustrated in table 3 below) were exported in logs with hardly any consideration for local use.

Table 3: Tree felled for export and local consumption in Benin 1935-1940

Year	Export	Local use
1935	5,038	217
1936	6,250	174
1937	9,403	151

from the forest to Sapele for processing and onward exportation to Europe. See. NAI, BD “Annual Reports, Benin Province 1948”, p. 37.

³⁷*Ibidem.*

³⁸ NAI BenProf. “Annual Report, Benin Province, 1950”, p. 40.

³⁹ NAI BenProf. CSO 26/2, 14617, Vol. XV, “Annual Report, Benin Province 1949”, p. 5.

1938	12,120	163
1939	12,878	213
1940	15,127	243

Source: NAI, BP 1642, “Forest Reserve: Trees felled”, p. 13.

Also, in 1949 about 20,000 trees were felled in Benin out of which only 565 were reserved for local use⁴⁰ thus representing less than two and half per cent of what was exported. Similarly, in Ishan Division, while permits were issued earlier in 1942 for the exportation of 1,269 trees in log, only 169 were ordered for local use.⁴¹ Probably the only redeeming feature of the forest commercialization and exploitation policy was the payment of royalties by timber firms to the Native Authorities and communities for the loss of their forests. Assessment of royalties paid by timber firms was based on actual trees felled⁴² and not on the size of forest reserves. The method of sharing the royalties was subject to periodic modifications. Initially, royalties from timbers were shared equally between the Benin Native Authority, the Paramount Chief and the community from which the timbers were extracted.⁴³ But from 1935 when the Native Authority took over the affairs of forest matters, it retained all the timber royalties collected.⁴⁴ It seemed the “big money” allegedly made especially by the Benin Native Authority from timber was illusion and did not reflect in actual figures. For instance, whereas the Benin Native Authority received a total amount of £72, 952 as forest revenue in 1949, £40,000 of this amount was expended for “regeneration of reserves.”⁴⁵ In effect, what actually accrued to the Benin Native Authority from the volume of 20,000 trees felled in 1949 was therefore, a meager £32,952. If this amount is divided by the total number of tree felled for exports, this amounted to ridiculous fee of about £1.65 per tree. This was bound to create friction between the Forestry Department and the Benin Native Authority;

⁴⁰ *Ibidem.* p. 6, NAI “Annual Report, Benin Province 1949”, p. 11. See also, Ahazuem and Falola, “production for the Metropolis”, p. 86.

⁴¹ For permits on export of timber in logs and local use in Ishan Division, see, NAI BenProf. CSO26/2, 14617, Vol. XIV, “Annual Reports Benin Province 1942”, p. 9.

⁴² NAI BenProf. 40, Vol. VIII, “Annual Report 1939”, p. 27.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ NAI BenProf 7, Vol. II, No. 7, “Annual Report, Benin Province, 1921”, p. 12. See also, Igbafe, *Benin Under British Administration*, p. 354.

⁴⁵ NAI BenProf. 1642, “Forest Reserves and Total Square Miles”, p. 2.

The ambitious scheme of aforestation embarked on by the Forestry Department has somewhat naturally produced few visible results and it is hard to convince the Council (Native Authority) that it is wise to tie up large sums of money for the benefit of prosperity.⁴⁶

Also, the foreign firms mentioned earlier held greater number of licensed compartments for actual exploitation of timber in Benin and ideally should have paid more royalties. Yet greater amount of all forest revenue was derived from African contractors;

African logging contractors and a few shippers are most profitably engaged in the trade. In the Division (Benin), (ironically) where foreign firms hold such large licensed areas, no less than a third of all forest revenue is derived from African contractors.⁴⁷

This implied that either the foreign firms did not disclose the actual volume of tree exploited in the forest or, evaded with impunity the payment of royalties to the Benin Native Authority.

Table 4: Comparative figures of forest revenue (fees and royalties) in Benin Province

Divisions	1947	1948	1949	1950	1951	1952	1953/1954
	£	£	£	£	£	£	£
Benin	38,000	58,000	72,952	89,880	112,644	112,043	117,000
Asaba	5,230	10,696	14,917	13,748	10,933	NA	NA
Ishan	NA	4,935	7,809	10,678	6,878	6,978	35,000
Kukuruku	NA	355	927	1,085	1,468	NA	1,085
Total	43,230	73,986	96,605	115,391	131,923	119,021	153,085

Sources: Annual Reports: Benin Division 1948, p. 41; 1950, p. 89; Benin Province, 1950, p. 29 ;1951, pp.12 and 14; and 1954, pp. 36 and 37.

⁴⁶ NAI Ben.Prof. "Annual Report 1949, p.15, NAI BP "Annual Report, 1950", p. 6.

⁴⁷ NAI Ben.Prof. "Annual Report 1946", p. 9.

Processing of Timber for Exports

Furthermore, whereas Benin Division accommodated the highest number of forest reserves and accounted for almost half of the volume of British export of timber from Nigeria, no effort was made by the colonial authorities to establish saw mills in the Division. The closest available saw mills to the Division were established at Sapele and Obiaruku (both in Warri Province) respectively by AT & P and the Nigerian Hardwood after the War. The choice of their locations was evidently clear; the AT & P. and the Nigerian Hardwood owners of the saw mills could make use of the facilities at Sapele port to export sawn timber to Europe. Saw mills were established to process logs mainly because it was easier and cheaper to freight sawn planks than logs to Europe. The functioning of the Sapele saw mills depended largely on Benin timber. According to the Annual Report 1950,

[t]he mills in Sapele are both working to capacity principally with timber from this (Benin) Division, and extraction within the concession areas will have to be stepped up to meet the demands of the Sapele Mills. British West African Timber have ordered a new saw-mill at Sapele, to be supplied entirely with Benin Timber, and it is hoped (not realized) that they may open a sale department in Benin to supply local demands.⁴⁸

While the bulk of timber exploited was regularly shipped either as logs or lumber to Britain and other European countries, Benin and other part of the Province experienced scarcity of wood for local consumption. This situation was aptly illustrated in the 1949 Annual Reports, “[t]he sawmilling interests do not cater for the local markets consequently, timber for local use is mostly hand sawn and the demand is much greater than the supply”.⁴⁹ As Mr. J.D. Hamilton, the District Officer Benin Division observed, “it is absurd that with all the wealth of trees, it is scarcely possible to buy a plank” in Benin.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ NAI BenProf. CSO 26/2 14617, Vol. XV, “Annual Reports Benin Province”, p. 2.

⁴⁹ NAI BenProf “Annual Report, Benin Division 1950”, p. 84. Also See NAI BP “Annual Report Benin Province 1950”, p. 30.

⁵⁰ NAI BenProf. 41 Vol. IX “Annual Report Benin Division, 1944”, p. 115.

Conclusion

In view of the discussions above, it is obvious that concerted efforts were made by the colonial authorities to protect the forest and develop the timber industry in order to respond to the needs of the metropolitan economy. It is equally obvious that the actual exploitation of the forest resources was not beneficial to generality of the people except few chiefs who realized some fortunes as timber sub-contractors to foreign firms. It cannot be denied however that the commercialization and exploitation of the forest and the subsequent development of the timber industry led to the construction of roads, provided employment for the people and generated some revenue for the Native Authority. But the overall sacrifice for these were overbearing on the people whose farmlands were deforested and became eroded in addition to being denied the rights to hunting and collection of games in the forests. Hence Michael Crowder concludes that whatever economic benefits may have accrued to the people (in this respect from exploitation of forest resources) resulted from accident not design.⁵¹ Suffice to state that this so called “economic benefits” are negligible compared to the level of exploitation and deprivation that took place. Hence this paper subscribes to the view expressed by Henri Cosnier while taking a critical assessment of the colonial situation in part of West Africa that, “we have left almost nothing for the producer (forest owners) in return for the considerable riches our commerce has gained. Almost nowhere are there any fixed riches”⁵². What emerged after colonial rule were secondary forests with almost all first class trees felled while post colonial government had to embark on revolutionary forest regeneration of economic trees for future resource (timber) exploitation.

⁵¹ NAI BenProf. “Annual Report Benin Province 1949”, p. 6.

⁵² Michael Crowder, *West Africa Under Colonial Rule*, London, Hutchinson, 1968, p. 274. See also, J. Ihonvbere & T. Falola, “Illusion of Economic Development” in T. Falola (ed.), *Britain and Nigeria*, pp. 200-219.

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